

Federal funding just a stop-gap for budget windfalls

By Stephen Neukam

RIDER President Gregory Dell’Omo said that funding from the federal stimulus packages would offset only one-third of the university’s lost revenue from the pandemic and zeroed in on other national initiatives that he would throw support behind, in an interview with The Rider News on April 13.

Between the three stimulus bills, the university is expected to receive a total of \$18.7 million, according to Dell’Omo. Just \$10.3 million will be available to the university, while the rest was designated for students.

The \$10.3 million will only sop up some of the \$30 million in lost revenue due to the pandemic, according to Dell’Omo.

The deficit is one that schools all around the country are facing, with hopes to recoup losses with increased normalcy in operation in the fall semester — a plan Rider is counting on.

Dell’Omo said that under President Joe Biden there has been more flexibility on how the university can utilize the federal funds it has received.

The American Rescue Plan, the most recent stimulus package passed under the Biden administration, will provide Rider with an estimated \$9.6 million, according to Dell’Omo. Half of that must be distributed to students.

National initiatives

With a new administration in Washington, Dell’Omo said that universities will begin to push for a number of public policy goals to aid higher education. In particular, he stressed the importance of the expansion of federal Pell Grants.

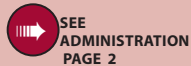
“[It] would be a significant enhancement for the affordability and accessibility to higher education for lower-income individuals,” said Dell’Omo. “That would be a big boost.”

Dell’Omo also said that universities would turn their attention to the massive infrastructure bill that the Biden administration is attempting to put together, with an initial price tag of \$2 trillion. The university



Courtesy of Rider University

Rider President **Gregory Dell’Omo** said that under President Joe Biden, there has been more flexibility on how the university can utilize the federal funds it has received.



Union rejects university contract extension, teases summer talks

By Sarah Siock

RIDER’S chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) said a full contract negotiation will take place this summer after the administration approached the union with a one-year extension of the present agreement that did not include minimum requirements spelled out by the union.

On April 7, the AAUP negotiating team sent an email to members that said the union asked the administration for an agreement that included a substantial across-the-board salary increase, an improvement in retirement plans, an improvement in support for scholarship and protection against layoffs.

“Their response was a direct slap in the face,” the AAUP negotiating team wrote in the email.

The administration offered a 1% salary increase that was below the rate of inflation, the ending of the tuition subsidy plan for study at institutions other than Rider, no improvement in retirement plans, no improvement in support for scholarship and no protection against layoffs, according to the union.

Jeffrey Halpern, AAUP contract administrator and chief grievance officer added, “There was an offer to continue the existing support for summer fellowships which was drastically reduced in the last agreement.”

The administration’s response comes at a time where universities across the country are cutting costs due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the AAUP’s national faculty compensation salary survey that was published on April 12, real wages for full-time faculty decreased for the first time since the Great Recession. The survey also asked about the wide range of actions taken by U.S. colleges and universities in response to financial difficulties stemming from the



The Rider News

In May 2017, union members demonstrated and called for fair contract negotiations with the university.

pandemic. The survey revealed that nearly 60% of institutions implemented salary freezes or reductions.

Rider’s current faculty employment agreement, which was ratified in June 2020, extended the contract until August 31, 2021. The agreement marked the seventh year in a row that faculty did not receive a cost-of-living raise.

“We did not reject the offer to discuss the possibility of a further one-year extension of the present agreement, but we did say that any such extension would have to meet certain minimum requirements which we spelled out to the administration. They then made an offer that did not come close to meeting those minimums, and so we replied to that the normal process for negotiating a successor agreement should take place this summer,” said Halpern.

The email sent to union members earlier this month also asked faculty to sign a pledge: “I do not want to strike but I will if we can not achieve a fair contract by negotiations alone.”

Halpern said the statement is not a formal authorization to strike.

“We do not want to strike, but if negotiations without a strike cannot achieve a fair contract we are prepared to do so. Keep in mind that the faculty and coaches represented by the AAUP have seen major reduction in their financial well-being over the last seven years,” said Halpern.

The administration declined to answer questions from The Rider News regarding the union’s minimum requirements for the agreement.

Instead, Vice President for Human Resources Rob Stoto replied with a statement that said, “While the parties have been in communication regarding the terms of an extension to the existing labor agreement, out of respect to the process we believe it is important to let these discussions play out and not comment publicly at this time regarding the specifics of those communications. Despite the many challenging times that higher education has faced over the years, the parties have a long history of successfully bargaining extensions to the collective bargaining agreement, and we are confident that we will do so again this year.”

According to Halpern, negotiations for the next agreement would begin after June 1. He added that the union would be open to another, more generous from the administration.

“We would consider an offer from the administration that met our minimum requirement,” said Halpern.

INSIDE

DECASTRO’S DOUBLE

Senior forward Pablo Decastro scored two goals in Rider’s MAAC tournament win over Iona.

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LOVE THY SELF

Khloe Kardashian in shambles over untouched Instagram photo.

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GOAT YOGA

Students relax and de-stress with outdoor goat yoga on the Campus Green.

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SECURITY BRIEFS

BY SARAH SOCK

Medical Emergency

EMTs on campus. On April 6, at 2:56 p.m. Public Safety was dispatched to a medical emergency in the residential complex behind Wright Hall. A student was having difficulty catching their breath and felt like their heart was racing. An ambulance was requested and after evaluating the student, the EMTs determined that the student should be transported to the hospital.

Alcohol Violation

Too young. On April 10, at 10:37 p.m. Public Safety was dispatched to Gee Hall for a reported alcohol violation. A community assistant in the building overheard loud voices coming from a room and, upon investigating, determined that five underage students were unmasked and in the presence of alcohol. Public Safety disposed of the alcohol and the students were referred to Community Standards for a conduct violation.

Mask-free

Heading out? Mask up. On April 11, at 2:26 p.m. Public Safety was dispatched to the Student Recreation Center (SRC) for the report of a student not wearing their mask inside. Upon their arrival, the SRC staff informed Public Safety that a student was not wearing their mask and it was the second incident of them doing so. The staff requested that the student be asked to leave. Public Safety spoke with the student and asked them to leave. They left without incident and the student was referred to Community Standards for a conduct violation.

— Information provided by Public Safety Capt. Matthew Babcock

Administration cautiously optimistic about fall semester

CONT'D FROM PAGE 1

president said that while some community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities are included in the proposal, other institutions aren't.

"I think there will be a lot more discussion over those kinds of things to see if we can really broaden the access to some infrastructure needs," said Dell'Omo. "Could we open that up to a little bit broader spreading of that wealth?"

Dell'Omo also touched on the push for student loan forgiveness, saying he prefers to use federal Pell Grants to make education more affordable for students because of the complexities of student debt forgiveness.

A hope for the fall semester

The university is continuing its plans for a more normal fall semester, with Dell'Omo cautiously optimistic that the worrying coronavirus numbers nationwide will subside and allow the school the opportunity to return to business as usual.

Enrollment numbers are down from last year, with undergraduate applications down 5% and deposits down 8%. Transfer applications are also down 12%, according to Dell'Omo.

Dell'Omo said that many prospective students want to have a regular college experience while also balancing safety needs. He hopes that by July, the school will have a definitive idea of whether it can proceed with a normal semester.

"But if things require an adjustment, we have to, probably in the middle of July really, make a decision," said Dell'Omo.

As vaccines become more widely available, the university is hoping to offer students, staff and faculty the ability to get vaccinated on campus. Dell'Omo said that a survey of the community found that there was "a lot of interest" in getting vaccinated on campus.

The challenge, Dell'Omo said, is the supply of vaccines. The partner that the administration is working with to make the immunizations available on campus would use the Moderna two-shot vaccine. The president said he hoped the school could make an announcement in the next few weeks.

Stephen Neukam/The Rider News



Rider President **Gregory Dell'Omo** said that he felt like the pandemic was this generation of college students' Great Depression in an interview with The Rider News on April 13.

"This is your Great Depression"

Reflecting on the past year and a half, Dell'Omo said that he felt like the pandemic was this generation of college students' Great Depression. In all, he said he's been impressed with the resiliency and responsibility of the student body.

"You can hang your heads high and say that at Rider, we dealt with this very, very effectively," said Dell'Omo. "We're proud of what we've accomplished and how we got through it."

With both the class of 2021 and 2020 expected to be on campus for commencement ceremonies on May 15 and 16, Dell'Omo said that he was excited for the "more intimate" graduations on the Lawrenceville campus.

"Even though it's going to be shorter events — not all the pomp and circumstance — I think it is going to be an acknowledgment that we are together as a family," said Dell'Omo. "And that's going to be special."

The Rider News wins best overall website and other awards

By Hailey Hensley

DURING a tumultuous year, especially for reporting, student journalists at The Rider News were hard at work to produce high-quality content for the Rider community and as a result, several members of the staff have received awards from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the New Jersey Press Foundation (NJPF).

The Rider News won best overall website from the NJPF, with the foundation stating they enjoyed the website's visuals throughout.

Sports editors Shaun Chornobroff and Dylan Manfre, with their story "Kevin Baggett opens up about social justice," received the Region One Mark of Excellence for sports reporting at a small school. Chornobroff and Manfre also received a second-place award from the NJPF for the same story.

Chornobroff also received a third-place award in sports writing from the NJPF for his story "Broncs plummet in standings in return; Men's basketball gets victory in honor of absent teammate."

"I am honored to get this award. It was an unconventional year to say the least, Dylan and I had to put in a lot of effort and to be rewarded for that effort is more than I could ever ask for," Chornobroff said.

In addition, Executive Editor Stephen Neukam received an in-depth reporting mark of excellence award for his story "Trauma behind the curtain: allegations uncovered, investigation launched, professor leaves Rider." Neukam was also awarded from the NJPF, receiving a second-place award in the investigative journalism category for the same story he



Carolo Pascale/The Rider News

The Rider News staff gained an extensive amount of awards this year despite ongoing challenges related to the pandemic.

received his SPJ award for.

Neukam emphasized the pride he felt in his staff as executive editor.

"I'm super proud of the staff's awards and what they accomplished this year through difficult circumstances. Even through the pandemic, the paper thrived and I'm honored to work with such a great group of peers," Neukam said.

From the NJPF, Tiffany Hartman took first place in the online video category with her video titled "Rider student directs documentary on African American veterans fight for civil rights."

News Editor Tatyanna Carman received her own second-place commendations for News Writing, with her stories titled "Student use of Rider counseling services stagnant despite pandemic stresses" and

"Community Assistant compensation has stopped as a result of university housing closure."

Carman said, "I am so grateful to receive this award. I have learned so much from writing for The Rider News. I put a lot of work into my articles, especially the one I won the award for, so I am glad I was recognized for it."

Opinion Editor Qur'an Hansford and Stephen Neukam took another second-place award for editorial writing with their story "Demand fair tuition; College during COVID; Pass/fail."

Hansford said, "I am full of so much gratitude to be able to, not only get an inside look at the reality of my future profession but to win awards for my words and opinions is a whole other feeling. I am so proud of The Rider News team and all the hard work we have all accomplished."

Features and Entertainment editor Sarah Siock, Video Editor Tiffany Hartman and Features and Entertainment Editor Christian McCarville took third place in the web project category for their web project "Rider student directs documentary on African American veterans' fight for civil rights."

Siock is the incoming executive editor of TRN and this is her first award at the paper. She emphasized the teamwork that is put into the paper.

"I am so proud to be a staff member on an award-winning paper. My time with TRN has taught me a great deal about journalism through learning from the talented staff members," she said. "These awards reflect the hard work of each student who works on the newspaper. Every week the staff works diligently to produce a paper that we are proud of."

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On-campus coronavirus cases, quarantine and isolation numbers decline

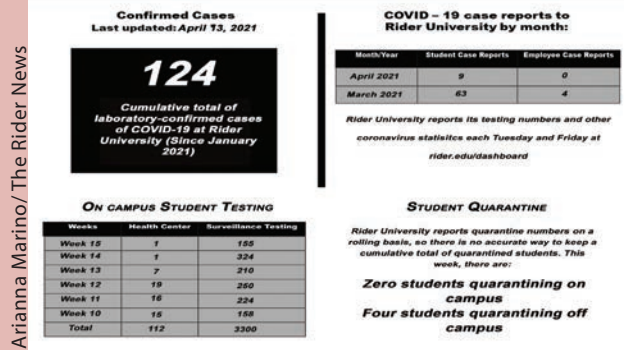
By Austin Ferguson

As Rider begins to float the possibility of vaccinating students on campus, positive case, quarantine and isolation numbers related to COVID-19 in the university community continued to decline, with Rider's online dashboard reporting the lowest statistics in all three categories in at least the last two months.

Rider Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Planning and Secretary to the Board Debbie Stasolla confirmed that the university is in talks with a provider to administer COVID-19 vaccines for the Rider students and staff. Due to the status of the ongoing deal, the university was not at liberty to disclose the specific provider, though Rider President Gregory Dell'Omo confirmed the specific provider would administer the Moderna vaccine.

"We expect to hear from the provider by the end of the week regarding our ability to provide vaccination," Stasolla said. "It depends on the availability at the state level, so some of this is out of our hands and out of the provider's hands. We're doing our best to be able to offer students vaccination, or at least the first dose before the end of the spring semester."

Stasolla noted that the potential distribution of



Rider's COVID-19 implementation team projected that first doses would be offered later in April and second doses in late May.

vaccines would warrant those receiving them to schedule both doses to be administered on campus, as various health guidelines discourage getting two doses from two separate locations.

On April 8, the university sent an email notifying students that it is "working on offering on-campus two-dose COVID-19 vaccines for students," attaching a link to a survey gauging whether students have been or are in the process of being vaccinated and whether or not they would like to be vaccinated. According to Stasolla, a similar survey was distributed among staff

and faculty.

Rider's COVID-19 implementation team projected that first doses would be offered later in April and second doses in late May. The email from the university came on the heels of an announcement from President Joe Biden that all residents that are at least 16 years old will be eligible for vaccines.

While the university looks to provide vaccines for students, COVID-19 case numbers continued to decline, hitting their lowest marks in months between April 5 and 11. The university dashboard reported one new positive case for the second-straight week on April 9, four students in quarantine – all off campus – as of April 13 and one student in isolation off campus on that same date.

Stasolla shared her excitement for Rider's impending ability to provide vaccines for members of the university.

"I hope to be able to share really good news early next week [about vaccines]," Stasolla said. "But there are a number of things that still have to fall in place for us to do that and there are a number of [administrators and faculty] at Rider who are working hard to make this work for our employees and our students."

Rider expands hours for dining and recreational facilities

By Olivia Nicoletti

An announcement was made on March 25 that Rider University is expanding the hours of dining and recreational facilities after students have voiced concerns at university forums about the availability of dining options on campus in the past months.

Jersey Mike's is now open both Saturdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., and The Pub bar is now open on Thursdays and Fridays from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. The Pub is also operating on Sundays from 4:30 to 9 p.m. for to-go orders, according to a Rider press release.

The press release also stated that for the rest of the semester, on Saturdays and Sundays, The Schimek Family Fitness Center in the Student Recreation Center will be open until 7 p.m., making the weekly hours of operation Monday through Thursday from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., Fridays from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Upon students' requests, the Student Recreation Center Lobby and Atrium will now be open until 9 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

Daly Dining Hall is now offering meat alternatives along with fresh seafood and fresh fruit cups. Sonos and Create have also made plant-based proteins available according to the press release.

In regards to the dining options increasing their days and hours, Vice President for Facilities and University Operations Michael Reca agreed that the weekend access is a great advantage for students.

"What we did is we tried to mimic what we had



In addition to the expansion of hours, Daly Dining Hall is now offering meat alternatives along with fresh seafood and fresh fruit cups.

done in the fall semester, so we kept the same hours but when the spring came, there was a different feeling on campus and the students were questioning why certain things were not open," Reca said. "It gives them more variety on the weekends so they don't just have to go to Daly's, they can go now to various places on campus."

Faythe Morales, a sophomore health studies major, said she not only appreciates the additional weekend time for dining but feels relieved about the weekday expansions as well. Morales said she would miss dinner every week on Wednesdays due to the early closings.

"The expansion of dining hours has benefitted me a lot as a student because I am not rushing to eat dinner before they close," Morales said. "With my late classes, I don't have to worry about missing dinner anymore."

Ellie Hyland, a junior elementary education major, added to Morales' sentiment.

"I feel more at ease knowing that if my classes end a little later or I want to sit back and do homework a little longer, I can still be able to eat at the dining hall that day," Hyland said.

Reca clarified that the changes made were solely based on student suggestions. The staff has paid close attention to complaints and is working to please the majority.

"We're all ears. I mean, we're here for you. So as soon as we got those requests, we reacted right away and circled back to some folks from the SGA and circled back to some other students that were requesting this and everyone agreed this change sounded good."

Hyland is one of many students to appreciate Rider's attention towards students' needs.

"It feels good to hear when Rider is listening to the students' concerns. Especially during COVID, everything is so different than it was in the past and we're all trying to adapt to the new normal," Hyland said. "When Rider listens to their students and takes action with their concerns it definitely makes the students feel more comfortable and at home."

Reca realizes that every decision made for the majority of students will not please everyone, but there seem to be few issues regarding the recent decisions made.

"We always try for most of our students to benefit from these changes," Reca said. "The challenge is to balance finding the right set of parameters for our service providers as well as what meets the students' needs."

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Mixed media artist gives keynote address at Gender and Sexuality Studies colloquium

By Sarah Siock

ACCLAIMED gender-nonconforming writer, performer and public speaker, ALOK touched on several topics that ranged from the misconceptions of gender studies to violence against transgender individuals as the keynote speaker at Rider's 39th annual Gender and Sexuality Studies (GSS) colloquium on April 7.

Each year the colloquium takes place to highlight work students completed on issues related to gender and sexuality. Throughout the day there were several student presentations and a roundtable discussion. One of the largest events at the colloquium was ALOK's keynote address with 70 Zoom participants.

"We bring in a keynote speaker every year, someone who focuses on gender or sexuality because we as a program believe the university needs to consistently incorporate these topics into our larger intellectual climate," said Erica Ryan, director of the GSS program at Rider.

Ryan shared that as a mixed media artist, ALOK explores themes of trauma, belonging and the human condition. Additionally, ALOK is the author of the 2020 book "Beyond the Gender Binary."

Photo courtesy of the Gender and Sexuality Studies department



ALOK is a mixed media artist who explores themes of trauma, belonging and the human condition.

Throughout ALOK's speech, they stressed the importance of gender studies degrees and the work done in this field.

ALOK said, "I think gender studies is actually necessary. It's a constant debate of why do you have to have this thing? Time and time again, people always ask me why gender studies, but gender studies actually has been foundational to the entire way that I perceive the world."

Gender studies minors who attended the keynote address said they appreciated the value ALOK placed on gender studies.

Junior psychology major Michala Glassman said,

"I have never had anyone validate my GSS minor the way ALOK did. It was refreshing and reminded me of why this GSS department is so special and essential to my Rider experience. GSS folks can use their knowledge and lens of the world to add insight to very important situations going on."

ALOK focused on the historical context of gender studies and tied current events to past LGBTQ movements. For instance, ALOK spoke about a recent bill that was passed in Arkansas that prohibits gender-confirming treatments or surgery for transgender youths. ALOK called the bill, "one of the most draconian anti-trans legislations ever passed in U.S. history." They added that this bill and ones similar to it are interconnected to violence against transgender individuals.

"The narrative of linear progress says that in 2021, we're experiencing liberty and freedom that we've never experienced before, and any historian will enter the chat and be like, 'that's not necessarily true.' Actually, history is not a linear trajectory, it undulates. It responds to conditions that are happening in the world. There were actually times in history that were more liberated around gender and sexuality than what we have now," said ALOK.

ALOK also took time to ask for a moment of silence to pay tribute to individuals who lost their lives to anti-transgender violence. ALOK cited that 2020 was the most deadly year on record for anti-transgender violence in the U.S.

"Often ideas that I speak about get dismissed as abstract. What gender studies teach us is, that there is no such thing as transgender issues. There are issues that non-trans people have with themselves that they're taking out on trans people. We move the location away from empowering trans and gender diverse communities towards disempowering the gender binary," said ALOK.



Sarah Siock/The Rider News

Writer, performer and author ALOK gives the Keynote address at the 39th annual Gender and Sexuality Studies colloquium.

Paulette "Momma P" White gives comfort and motherly love to dining students

By Andriana Rice-Gilmore

It was the first warm day of the spring semester. Students wore jeans with rips and T-shirts without jackets. The walk from the dorms to Cranberry's seemed even more worthwhile. Was it because of the weather? Or simply because it was known that the radiance of Paulette "Momma P" White, the campus mother away from home, would beam even brighter?

"Good morning baby. Are you enjoying the weather?" said White as she greeted every student with her well-known energy and sweet smile. Born and raised in Trenton, New Jersey, she has been a Rider University employee for 37 years. White has worked in Rider's food department for a multitude of years, but today, she spends countless hours greeting students, checking their Campus Clear apps and taking their temperatures to make sure it meets Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines.

"I get up in the morning and thank God for waking me up, but I also love getting up in the morning and coming here and being around the students. It's a beautiful thing and I enjoy it," said 62-year-old White.

Rider has an enrollment of almost 4,000 students, many of whom usually live on campus and utilize the dining halls. Cranberry's has a protocol that offers students the option to either dine-in while social distancing or to take their meals to go. Since March of 2020, Rider has respected and encouraged students to take safety precautions and follow the protocols that have been set in place to maintain a healthy community.

"Kids will come in here and have more than four people in the booth and I have to separate them. I know they want to be near each other, but we have to follow the protocols. But I remind them that they have to go home to their parents. Staying safe is most important to them," White said as a wave of students walked through the Cranberry's doors, each greeted with a "Welcome!" or "How are we doing today?"

White has been an employee at Rider since the school was called Rider College, officially being granted university status in 1994. She has seen the community transition and experienced a variety of events, circumstances and situations, but this she believes to be one of the most historical and impactful occurrences.

She said, "This is history. And I just pray for our country and I pray for everyone to come together and respect each other more."

She added, "It's so different. I cannot wait for it to be over with. It took a big effect on me and my family. My daughter is a dental hygienist and she has to work with the public, so she doesn't want to come around me too much. Just to look at people who have parents in the nursing home and can't see them is heartbreaking."

When coronavirus started to become a household name, many were told that

the older generation was the most at risk to be exposed to the virus. Now, it is known that anyone, of any age, can be easily infected with the virus and even become a carrier. Many university students have had to quarantine in dorms, such as Conover Hall, which have become specified for students who may have come in contact with the virus.

"This is all a mess. So many people are having funerals and not allowing everyone to come. I don't want to go out that way, I want to go out with a big bang. My daughter says, 'Mom trust me, you'd probably have two funerals because you know everyone,'" she said as she chuckled at the honesty of her noticeable fame and prepared her hand-held thermometer for the students that were approaching the doors. A gust of warm wind entered along with the students as their eyes lit up to see "Momma P."

"The students call me 'Momma P.' I love it because I am that mother figure. Kids come here from home and you don't know what they're going through. Sometimes they need a mom from home. This one kid will sit and talk to me for hours just because," White said.

She added, "I know who I can say something to and I know who I can't. But the majority of the students I have an automatic connection with."

Senior elementary education major Kayla Williams said, "I genuinely have a love for that woman. It's so refreshing to see someone that you know actually cares for the students."

Many students attend Rider from different regions, states and countries. This means that they are spending many days away from their loved ones which can be difficult, especially because many people are starting to appreciate their families more due to the pandemic.

"She makes you feel welcomed and loved no matter who you are or what time of day it is. You can describe her and everyone will say the same thing. That she's such a nice person, she's funny and she really does remind you of a mother," Williams said.

Students see "Momma P" as more than just a staff member, which can be rare to find. White continued to remain the same positive piece of the Rider community, regardless of the negative effects of the virus.

"Money and hours have changed. I also miss the smiles and talking to everyone. I've worked in Daly's for so many years, but recently it has started to become boring to the point I didn't even want to come to work. It really put a damper on everything. It's a ghost town. I've been here for so many years and have watched this place grow and change and now it's just empty," she said.

She included, "I have become friends with a lot of the staff and teachers over the years. They've been to my house and I've been to theirs. They look at me as a friend rather than a worker. I miss all of that."

However, she mentioned, "Over quarantine, I have had my family come and stay with me. My kids and my niece and nephew always catch me and put me on their TikTok. That TikTok app is something else." She added, "It's been really good family time, but at the same time, it was too much time together. I'm happy to be back."

Like White, students have been making the best of the situation. Although things are not entirely normal, the university has been making transitions back to normality. Students seem to be eager for the weather to be warming, with hopes that it will bring positivity and smiles back to campus. Smiles that would match the luminous of Rider's "Momma P."



Photo courtesy of Andriana Rice-Gilmore

Paulette White, an employee of Rider University for the past 37 years, is ready to take temperatures with a smile and a welcome heart

Namaaste: Goat yoga helps students to relax and de-stress on campus

By Aaliyah Patel

A BEGINNER-FRIENDLY outdoor yoga class was held on the campus green on April 10 at 11:30 a.m. inviting students to de-stress with different yoga poses and goats of different types, sizes and ages.

Put together by the Student Entertainment Council (SEC), the event worked with "Namaaste Goat Yoga," a farm that hosts all-skills level yoga classes around New Jersey and Pennsylvania. 12 goats were brought to campus as they helped induce therapeutic benefits such as animal and laughter therapy. Sessions were divided into three groups lasting for about an hour with 45 minutes set aside for yoga and 15 minutes dedicated to pictures and hugs with the goats.

The 25 students that had signed up were required to bring their own towels and mats to adhere to COVID-19 protocols. Everyone in attendance had to remain socially distanced and wear masks the entire time. The instructor guided participants throughout the various poses.

Julia Bayait, a second-year elementary and multidisciplinary studies major and member of the SEC, helped organize the event and ensure safety measures were taken seriously.

"COVID protocols were the most important aspect of our event and we took it into consideration during every step of planning. When reaching out to the goat



Courtesy of Kaitlyn Kurfuss

Sophomore marketing major **Kaitlyn Kurfuss** enjoyed spending time with the various goats available at the event.

farm, they had their own rules and regulations in mind that they brought along with them to campus. Some of these restrictions included a socially distant goat pen where everyone could fit comfortably, hand sanitizer at check-in and masks at all times," Bayait said. "Everyone also brought their own mats and towels to ensure there was no cross-contamination. Lastly, we had two SEC members and an advisor, Lucia White, on-site to make sure there were six feet between each guest."

As students start transitioning back into more in-person events, these protocols will remain in effect.

Kaitlyn Kurfuss, a second-year marketing major, felt relaxed after completing one of the yoga sessions.

"This event was so fun. It's perfect for those that are good at yoga and awful at yoga. The poses were very beginner-friendly, and you didn't have to do them if you wanted to just pet the goats instead. Our session had great experiences with the goats, they were all very friendly and ready to cuddle," Kurfuss said.

The SEC will continue to host events that encourage mental and physical wellness throughout the final weeks of the spring semester.



Courtesy of @RiderStudentLife

Safety protocols were properly followed throughout the goat yoga sessions. The goat pen allowed for adequate social distancing and masks were required for the entirety of the event.

Rider's cheer team adapts to online environment and has hope for the future

By Tori Pender

RIDER'S cheer team has missed many opportunities since the beginning of the pandemic, but that is not stopping the group from becoming innovative.

Junior popular music studies major and cheer captain Trevor Sullivan said, "Because of the pandemic, our [Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference] Tournament in spring 2020 ended abruptly for us, as it did for the basketball teams, band, Rider Dance Team and media team."

Typically, the cheer team would perform at every home game for men's and women's basketball, however, because of state guidelines, that was no longer allowed.

"Due to the pandemic, the NCA College National Cheer Competition in Daytona, Florida, was also put on hold," said Sullivan.

In 2019, the cheer team placed 10th place in NCA under the Intermediate All Girls Division 1 category, according to Varsity TV.

Sullivan said, "And in fall 2020, we missed our performance in Rider's Midnight MAACness and all basketball games due to the pandemic."

Even with all the cancellations, the cheer team has become innovative with their events.

"This semester we plan on trying to have a collaboration with the Rider Dance Team, so that may be virtual or in person," stated Sullivan.

In the past, a movie night was hosted by the team and there is a possibility of another in the future. One of the things the team misses the most is performing during basketball games.

Nicole Inferno, junior psychology major and second-year team member said, "Our team looks forward to practicing and performing a routine to not only showcase our team but also kick off the basketball season. And lastly, one of the hardest parts about this pandemic has been not being able to cheer on our basketball teams this season."

"We do still log on and watch the games virtually but it's nothing like being at a game and cheering on our fellow Broncos," said Inferno.

Adapting to the ever-changing guidelines has been hard for performance and team-based clubs.

Sullivan said, "To adapt to this time, the team has begun to heavily use our group chats so that we are all aware that we aren't alone in this world."

Technology can only go so far on a contact team.

Inferno added, "The most challenging aspect of meeting via Zoom for cheer is the fact that we can't work on and progress in our stunts. Stunting is a big part of our routines and not being able to meet in person to perfect and keep learning new stunts is very hard."

Even though being all online has many cons, it has helped the team grow.

"I am so lucky to be a part of an amazing team filled with amazing people. Our

group chat is always going off with funny TikToks or old pictures and videos from past seasons," said Inferno.

As the group is growing closer together, their captain enjoys the challenge of cheer via Zoom.

"I think I like the fact that it is more of a challenge to keep up with my team physically," said Sullivan.

While the physical aspects of the team are a challenge, this has inspired the group to become creative in other ways.

Inferno said, "Our group chat is always talking about ways to create events for this season that involves team bonding and the welcoming of potential new members. Everything is still in the works and more ideas are being created, so the best way to stay connected with our team and future events are by following our Rider Cheer Instagram page."



Courtesy of Trevor Sullivan

Rider's cheer team will not be attending the NCA for the second year in a row because of the ongoing pandemic.

Students put their leadership abilities to the test in global competition

By Christian McCarville

DEVELOPING a sense of leadership is foundational for many different careers and life opportunities. The Collegiate Leadership Competition (CLC) gives students from around the world the opportunity to showcase their leadership skills and compete against other strong leaders.

Associate Director of the Center for the Development of Leadership Skills Laura Seplaki coaches a small group of Rider students to compete each year in the CLC.

"The CLC was created to provide an opportunity for leadership educators to coach a team, teach leadership skills through CLC terms and concepts, to bring various teams together for them to compete with each other," said Seplaki.

Rider's CLC team consists of six students: junior arts and entertainment industries management major Katie Blanton, junior accounting major LeeAnna Alpert, sophomore organizational psychology major Amanda Marrazzo, sophomore management major Lindsey Mulrooney, freshman elementary education major Kayla Kanarkowski and freshman arts and entertainment industries management major Megyn Kukulka.

Kukulka, a new addition to the team, explained why she was interested in competing in the CLC.

"As a freshman and new member of the Leadership Development Program I was looking for ways to continue to improve my leadership skills and meet new people," said Kukulka. "As soon as I met my fellow teammates, I knew I was in the right place."

This year, the CLC has gone fully remote, providing new opportunities as well as new challenges.

"In the past, we would meet at the University of Delaware and that would be our competition day," said Seplaki. "All of the teams came together in the region, usually about ten or so teams. Going virtual, there are about 30 teams competing."

This new virtual setting greatly widened the competition, but the team rose to the challenge.

"The one thing I love about the team this year is that, despite going virtual, they've been really cohesive," said Seplaki. "They are really dedicated and push themselves to do even more."

In the weeks leading up to the global finals, the team had to complete three different challenges to earn points. Points were earned based not only on the result of the challenge, but also on the leadership and collaborative processes used.

Seplaki began coaching the team by meeting with them once a week and teaching them the CLC terms and concepts. In the Knowledge Challenge, the team had to use these terms and concepts to respond to a variety of questions. Overall, they completed this challenge with a perfect score of 100 points.

The Spot Challenge required the team to work collaboratively and intelligently. They were asked to buy a package of Oreos and stack them. The more Oreos successfully stacked, the more points earned. The team finished this challenge with a total of 80 points.

The Impact Challenge was where the team was able to truly showcase its abilities. For this challenge, each team had to create a social media campaign and hold virtual events to support the campaign.

The Rider team used the FaceBook platform to develop the "Broncs Choose to Include" campaign. The team members partnered with the Unified Sports club to bring awareness to the values of diversity, equity and inclusion.

The social media campaign was shared throughout the university, building a strong following. Blanton commented on the success of the team's campaign.

"This was the first time we were all given the opportunity to put our leadership skills to the test on a digital platform and, through this semester alone, we were able to create a digital campaign with over 500 followers, present a virtual event on the importance of positive interactions with those with disabilities, as well as take on several leadership challenges," said Blanton. "I am so thankful for my team and everything we accomplished and this experience is something I will never forget."

Going into the global finals, Rider's team had already amassed a significant amount of points. The team would have to complete two more activities during the finals, and then its final placement in the competition would be determined.

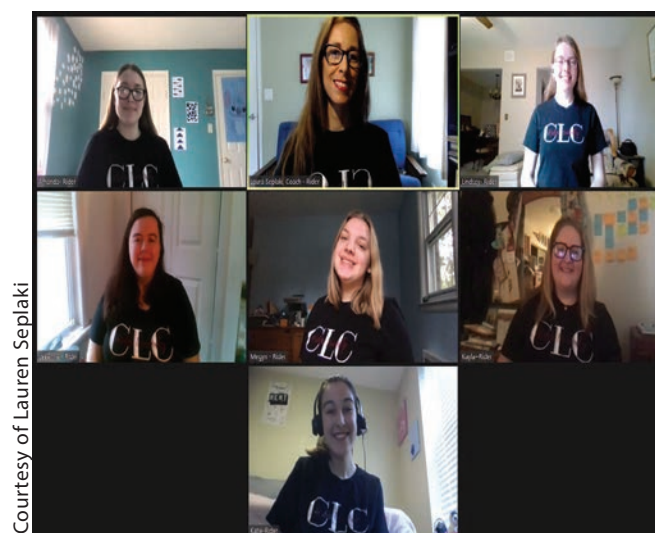
On April 10, the team competed in the global finals, scoring enough points to finish in 6th place out of 30 teams. This was an incredible achievement for the team and Seplaki was proud of her team of leaders.

"They did such an amazing job because of the wonderful team synergy they developed," said Seplaki.

The team had also chosen to award Kukulka as Most Improved Player and Mulrooney as Most Valuable Player.

With an impressive final placement, Seplaki was mainly grateful to have the opportunity to compete and have the team develop their skills as leaders.

"One of the mottos in CLC is: There will be one winner and lots of learners," said Seplaki. "I think that's the point of it all. That's why I love competing in the CLC because no matter what, we are learning, we are winning."



Courtesy of Lauren Seplaki

Rider's CLC team has learned to work together effectively despite the challenges of a remote setting.

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In our first conversation, Black Men Unified, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc., and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., will discuss how they feel regarding the harsh reality of complacency at Rider. They feel that their voices are heard during the midst of social unrest, although Blackness does not start and stop as quickly as those conversations.

Understanding how Black men feel during these periods is essential; yet, we recognize that they have more to contribute to every discussion. They will discuss race and identity during this event and how these issues affect our campus and beyond. Our conversation will be centered around Black men's connection to Rider and how we can help improve their experience.



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Kholé Kardashian's bikini photo fiasco

THE beauty standard is constantly changing and evolving based on what our society begins to focus on, and celebrities play a huge role in what's 'trending.' One such family, who has built an empire off public appearance and marketing to the beauty standard, is the Kardashians. This week, Khloé Kardashian has been at the center of the body image conversation after an unintentional poolside photo of her leaked on social media.

While I can empathize with Khloé Kardashian's photo fiasco and wouldn't want to trivialize another person's insecurities, it's also important to recognize the contributions that she, and her family, have made to body-image culture. Has she not fallen victim to the warped beauty 'standard' that she has helped to uphold?

The Kardashians have always been at the center of the body conversation, from plastic surgery allegations to advertising detox teas and intense photoshopping. The phrase 'nothing you see on the internet is real' could not ring truer, especially in the conversation surrounding body image, when ordinary people compare themselves to images of celebrities who have access to expensive plastic surgery procedures, professional photo editors, personal chefs and skilled trainers.

There is nothing wrong with having a procedure done to make yourself more comfortable on your journey to self-love; there is nothing wrong with wanting to eat better or work out to meet a goal. There is something wrong with passing off these behaviors and their results as completely and equally attainable to all people.

It is so harmful, and yet so easy, to

look at photos of celebrities and not consider the luxury of time, money and even genetics, that feeds into their appearance. We need to stop operating off of this false narrative that the beauty standard is attainable, because it isn't.

The beauty standard is a myth, ingrained so deeply in our culture, meant to feed on insecurities — predominantly of women — to sell whatever magic product will make us look like we belong on the cover of magazines and, in turn, line the pockets of corporations until it is time to move on to the next aesthetic.

Bodies are not, and should not, be trends.

Khloé Kardashian, a cis-gendered, straight, rich, able-bodied white woman has been conditioned to act so strictly within these confines of societal pressures, so, now imagine how these pressures are exacerbated in the experiences of trans women, plus-sized women, women without celebrity budgets, disabled women and women of color.

The conversation surrounding body image, especially in this case, is a double-edged sword. While of course I feel sympathy for Khloé Kardashian having an unwanted photo leaked, it is also necessary to consider how she and other celebrities are responsible for upholding harmful and toxic aspects of beauty culture, whether it is intentional or not.

*Kate McCormick
freshman English major*

THE Rider News

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GREEN CORNER

Farm to the table: What is the big deal about organic food?

HAVE you ever seen a busy farmer's market and wondered what the buzz was or if the quality of food was better? The Office of Sustainability is here to tell you it is.

Farm-grown food, like fruits and vegetables, can be sourced in two distinct ways: "factory" farmed via mass production or locally grown. Factory farms are efficient and feed a lot of people for less money, but locally grown food is much fresher, more sustainable and will benefit your local community.

In terms of quality, when food is mass-produced, it is usually preserved for shipment and could be contaminated with pesticides interfering with the product's freshness and nutritional value.

Virtua Health reported, "Fruits and vegetables begin to lose their nutrients within 24 hours of being picked, so fresher produce is more nutritious. In addition, locally grown food is picked at its peak ripeness, when it's most dense with nutrients."

Junior musical theater major John Ververis has experienced this first hand, "The quality and freshness of the locally grown produce can never be beaten. You can taste the difference and you know exactly where your food is coming from — that is something I am proud to support."

As far as sustainability, understanding food's carbon footprint is key to understanding why locally grown food is more sustainable.

Sustainable America says, "food travels the world before it reaches a plate."

It's true, most of the food in your grocery store has traveled more miles than you would in a day. Not to mention the production aspect of large-scale farming racks up a large carbon footprint, including fuel to power machinery and waste produced from the farm. However, when food is locally sourced it eliminates a lot of the food's carbon footprint due to the smaller scale.

Fellow Eco-Rep Muriel Baki, whose family is involved in local food sourcing, said, "Local food is the cornerstone of a healthy and sustainable community."

Luckily, locally sourced food is very accessible to the Rider community as Rider Dining uses locally sourced produce.

Resident District Manager of Gourmet Dining Erik Weatherspool said, "We believe in using fresh ingredients and sourcing locally, to support our community, as well as teaching our students the benefits of sourcing locally."

Ambrogi Foods provides produce from local farms in the tristate area covering New York to Virginia.

According to Ambrogi Foods webpage, "We are proud to support strong, local community farms through our 'Let's Get Local' program. We buy and distribute produce, dairy and specialty items locally allowing us to invest in the expansion and success of our neighborhood businesses and communities."

Off-campus options include two of many great markets in the area, Princeton's Farmer's Market and Village Farms in Lawrence.

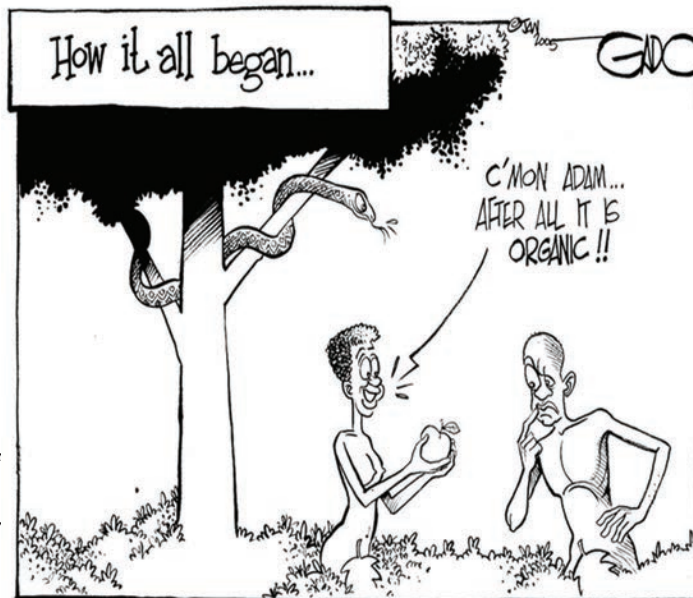
Lastly, in terms of community, most local farms create an abbreviated ecosystem on their land that can rejuvenate the environment for the community. This ecosystem is formed because smaller farms usually host a multitude of crops, animals, trees and plants, creating a sanctuary for wildlife to thrive.

This kind of life-boosting ecosystem is not created on a large-scale factory farm because the elements of the ecosystem are too isolated from one another for production purposes. Not to mention farmers on large farms are usually poorly paid and

bound to farming for large corporations.

The idea of creating a smaller scale wildlife sanctuary is very similar to the theme depicted in the film "Biggest Little Farm," which features a determined couple who aspire to understand the complexity of nature and bring harmony to the community by starting their local farm.

On April 13 and 14, the Office of Sustainability will be hosting a screening of the breathtaking documentary, and we would love to see you there



Courtesy of Cagle Cartoons

*Ashlyn Whiteside
Eco-rep*

WOMEN'S SOCCER

Rider's season comes to an end in semifinals

By **Carolo Pascale**

AFTER four straight years of being bested in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) Quarterfinals, the women's soccer team returned to the second round of the playoffs after earning a hard-fought 2-1 victory over Manhattan College on April 9.

Less than a week removed from their last meeting, which ended in a 3-1 Rider win, the Broncs and the Jaspers faced off again in the MAAC Quarterfinals as the fourth and fifth seeds respectively.

This was an extremely even game between both teams, having the same amount of total shots, 15, with nine on goal.

Both teams were firing on all cylinders, but Manhattan struck first with a goal at the 13 minute mark, giving the Jaspers a 1-0 lead.

In goal for the Broncs, freshman keeper Ellie Sciancalepore was doing everything she could to keep the score at 1-0, making four saves in the first half.

"Ellie has been great for us this year, especially as a freshman goalkeeper stepping into the shoes of Carmen Carbonell. During the game, she made some vital saves to keep us in the match early on and continued to come up with big saves late in the game," said sophomore forward Makenzie Rodrigues. "Her big saves helped shift the momentum of the game and make us feel more confident."

Sciancalepore made a season-high eight saves throughout the entire game.

After the end of the first half, Rider made some changes to try and get the tying goal and then take the lead. Manhattan also altered some things from the previous matchup against Rider.

"In the first game, we dominated possession so



Carolo Pascale/The Rider News

Sophomore forward **Makenzie Rodrigues** scored one goal in Rider's win over Manhattan.

they (Manhattan) adjusted in this game well and kept the game scrappy, denying us possession by playing long balls into the wide channel that was tough for our defenders to deal with. They then looked to press and force us into errors. It was hard for us to get into a rhythm and pass the ball around," said Head Coach Drayson Hounsome. "At halftime, we were able to give the players some belief that they needed to pass the ball out despite being pressured by Manhattan."

Going into the second half, Rider needed a goal to tie the game and they got it from Rodrigues at the 47 minute mark, assisted by senior midfielder Cameron Santers.

Rodrigues' game-tying goal was her team-leading sixth of the season. Overall, she has had 14 points from five games played this year.

"She has worked really hard at her game, which

has helped her confidence to take chances and play free," said Hounsome.

With chances going back and forth between both teams, the Broncs had an opportunity and capitalized. Rider took a 2-1 lead with a goal coming from freshman midfielder Hannah Freeman, assisted by sophomore forward Hailey Russel and Rodrigues.

Rider held onto its lead and finally made it past the MAAC quarterfinals for the first time in four years.

"It feels great to get through to the semi-finals and reach one of the goals we were striving for this year," said Rodrigues. "I'm glad we had a positive result this time around and I'm really hopeful for the future of our team this year and for years to come."

Rider then faced No. 1 seeded Siena Saints in the MAAC Semifinals game on April 12.

Siena scored at the 13 and 74 minute marks while junior back Niamh Cashin scored the lone goal for the Broncs at the 79 minute mark.

Siena won with a final score of 2-1 and Sciancalepore reflected on what the Broncs have done well this year.

"A big part of the success I've seen through this past season is due to my team and the confidence they have in me. As a team, I believe we have done a great job adapting and finding success in those moments. We've grown a lot as a team from Fairfield to Siena, and that is due to our ability to be flexible," said Sciancalepore. "This season was not ideal by any means, but with injury and other setbacks, the girls did a great job stepping up to plate and finding ways to get the job done."

The Broncs loss in this game eliminated them from the MAAC Women's Soccer Championship, allowing Siena to move on to face Monmouth on April 16.

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MEN'S BASKETBALL

Return to the MAAC: Vaughn to be a Bronc again

By Austin Ferguson and Shaun Chornobroff

FORMER Rider men's basketball star and two-time Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) first-team selection Dimencio Vaughn will return to Rider, transferring back to Lawrenceville after one season at Ole Miss, multiple sources with knowledge of his decision confirmed on April 12.

Vaughn, who spent four seasons at Rider from 2016-2020, entered the transfer portal after one season with the Rebels and declared for the NBA draft in March, not hiring an agent and maintaining college eligibility.

At Ole Miss, Vaughn averaged just six minutes per game and averaged 1.6 points per game, making all 16 of his appearances off the bench, despite being ranked as high as fourth in the nation's best graduate transfers by 247 Sports after starting in 68 of his 95 career appearances at Rider.

In his time with the Broncs, Vaughn averaged 13 points per game on his way to scoring over 1,000 career points, earned two MAAC first-team selections and multiple NABC All-District team selections among a collection of accolades as one of the backbones of Rider's last three teams, namely for the 2017-2018 Broncs, who clinched a share of that year's regular-season title.

It appears Vaughn is already comfortable with what his role will be with Rider this upcoming season.

"[Coach Baggett] just wants me to be Dimencio," Vaughn said of his role on the team to The Trentonian. "That role is pretty much explained."

Vaughn's decision to transfer back to a school he left a year prior is not unique in 2021; multiple players have done the same, including fellow former-MAAC star Kevin Marfo, who transferred to Texas A&M



Gerard Blandina/The Rider News

Former Rider forward **Dimencio Vaughn** is returning to Lawrenceville after one year at Ole Miss.

after leading the nation in rebounding in 2020 with Quinnipiac, only to transfer back to the Bobcats for next season.

Though the environment of Alumni Gym will be familiar for Vaughn, the roster he will be welcomed back to will not be. After recent news that guard Christian Ings is transferring to Norfolk State, Vaughn is set to only have three teammates he played with two seasons ago: junior center Ajiri Ogemuno-Johnson, sophomore guard Allen Powell and redshirt sophomore forward Tyrel Bladen, none of whom started a single game alongside Vaughn when they were together.

The day after it was revealed that Vaughn would be

returning to Alumni Gym, Jeff Goodman of Stadium reported that the Broncs had added Pepperdine transfer Sedrick Altman, a sophomore guard who started 22 of 26 games for Pepperdine in the 2020-21 season, averaging 8.1 points per game and shooting an efficient 50.6% from the field.

With other star conference players in the transfer portal or declared for the NBA draft, namely Siena stars Manny Camper, the defending MAAC Player of the Year; and Jalen Pickett, who won the same honor in 2020, Vaughn could be an early favorite for MAAC Player of the Year honors as he is currently in line to be the most tenured player on an otherwise young Rider team.

MEN'S SOCCER

Rider moves on to MAAC tournament semifinals

By Isaac Harris

ON April 11, the second-seeded Rider men's soccer team took on Iona College in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) quarterfinals for the third-straight season, leaving Ben Cohen field with a 4-1 victory.

The team was without longtime Head Coach Charlie Inverso in the crucial game due to health and safety protocols from the conference, leaving longtime associate head coach Victor Kotynski to lead the Broncs.

"It is hard to not have your coach on the sidelines [in a game] and even more in a playoff game, but I think everyone knows their role in this team and what are the things that make this good," said junior midfielder Guillermo Pavia Vidal.

Despite major challenges for the game, the Broncs came ready to play and started the first half strong, eventually getting a goal from Pavia Vidal to give the Broncs an early 1-0 lead to start the game.

16 minutes later, senior forward Pablo DeCastro

scored on a penalty kick, giving Rider a 2-0 lead to close the first half.

DeCastro pushed the Rider lead to 3-0 in the 64th minute on a goal assisted by senior midfielder Francisco Gomez Olano.

The goals were DeCastro's first two of the season and brought him to 27 for his decorated Rider career.

However, at the 78-minute mark of the second half, Iona's Esad Mackic scored a goal, taking advantage of a miscommunication between the goalkeeper and the defense.

Rider's defensive unit was its usual strong self, only allowing Iona to put two shots on net, one of which was saved by senior goalkeeper Pablo Gainois.

Mackic's goal was the first goal Rider gave up all season, ending seven halves of shutout soccer.

Despite the miscommunication, Rider scored a fourth goal at the 90-minute mark to secure the win, scored by junior midfielder Zakaria Alibou with assistance from Gomez Olano.

The goal was Alibou's first of his career and gave

Olano two assists in a stellar performance.

"It was a total team effort from the coaching staff and the players, everyone contributed to make this win possible," said Kotynski.

The longtime associate head coach took over head coaching duties temporarily for the team for the second time in his career, the first time being in the 2016 MAAC Semifinals against Siena.

Kotynski mentioned this game was less stressful than the Siena game which ended with a victory in a penalty shootout. A great team effort was the theme throughout the game, especially while dealing with the challenge of not having Inverso.

While waiting on Inverso's imminent return to the sidelines, the team will focus on recovery in preparation for hosting the sixth-seeded Monmouth Hawks on April 14 at 4 p.m.

FIELD HOCKEY

Rylee Diffenderfer: 'I'm fulfilling my purpose'

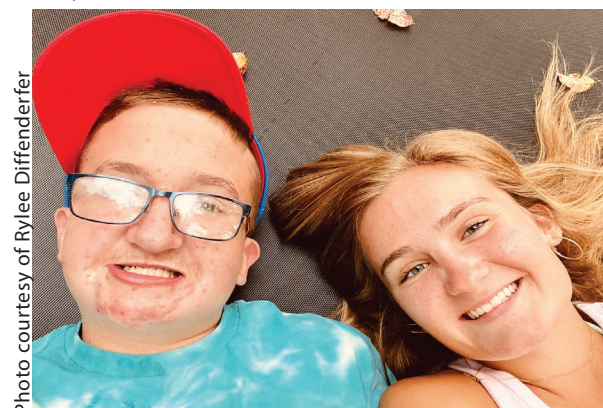


Photo courtesy of Rylee Diffenderfer

Jackson and Rylee Diffenderfer love going to the bookstore so he can read "Scooby-Doo" books.

CONT'D FROM PAGE 12

intense brain surgeries. A child herself at the time, she recalled seeing his fragile body pop up from a hospital crib with stitches lining his head.

"As soon as I saw Jackson, I didn't even see the stitches on his head," she wrote in a post. "All I saw was him sitting upright in his crib in the hospital room watching TV like a champ, just as if he was sitting in his own home. And I knew he would be okay. My little brother sat there with a quiet strength exuding from him."

Christina Diffenderfer was profoundly moved by her daughter's ability to articulate her vulnerability and feelings in the blog.

"As a mother, I have all these feelings inside," she said with pride. "There is so much you want to say to people and so much you want them to know ... I'm always blown away by it because I think 'Wow if I could write,' ... I'm just amazed by her."

Rylee Diffenderfer explained, "I think that even by just writing my blog, which maybe five people read, every time I write a post, that's better than nothing."

"In that way, I feel like I'm fulfilling my purpose," she said. "I feel like my purpose is to make the world a better place for him and his friends."

Scan the QR code to read Rylee Diffenderfer's blog.



Sports

ONLINE

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Click the QR code to watch Dylan Manfre's mini-documentary on Rylee and Jackson's bond.

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FIELD HOCKEY

The Diffenderfers: A sibling bond

By Dylan Manfre

RYLEE Diffenderfer is a Division I athlete on Rider's field hockey team, an elementary education major and a freshman adjusting to college life. But her larger purpose, she said, is her 16-year-old brother Jackson Diffenderfer, who was born with a plethora of medical anomalies.

Rylee Diffenderfer, 19, said playing field hockey is an escape from her constant worries about her brother's future. Writing is another escape, and she regularly blogs about Jackson and his health struggles.

"The same way that I'm transitioning into adulthood, [I want to] help him transition into adulthood as gracefully as possible," Rylee Diffenderfer said. "He's going to have to find things that he wants to do, like, career-wise, and, you know, with his relationships and things like that. ... And in that way I feel I'm fulfilling my purpose."

Her brother has inspired her goal of becoming a special education teacher and working with kids like her brother at a program similar to Jackson's Life Skills program at Warwick High School.

While she is 90 minutes away from her home in Lititz, Pennsylvania, at Rider she misses her brother and Jackson misses her too. He said he missed the trips to the bookstore and snuggling. He called her the "sunshine on my shoulder."

"I love her," he said.

Getting to know Jackson

Jackson's family describes him as "differently-abled."

He does not have autism or cerebral palsy, though his family said he has tendencies of each and people may assume that he has those conditions if they do not know him. In fact, Josh Diffenderfer, Jackson's father, agreed it would be a disservice to refer to his son as having special needs.

"When you let those words [differently-abled] sink in and realize what they actually mean, that's what it is," Josh Diffenderfer said passionately. "There's no standard for what a human being should be. They're the best we have to offer in society. They don't judge each other, they don't manipulate to gain an advantage over one another. They're simply loving and seeking joy and happiness."

Rylee Diffenderfer continues to play field hockey because of her brother. Their mother, Christina Diffenderfer, asked her first-born son what he likes most about seeing his sister play.

"Cheering!" he exclaimed.



Photo courtesy of Rylee Diffenderfer

Jackson and Rylee Diffenderfer have always shared an inseparable bond.

Jackson is usually the loudest at every game — he loved chanting "Go Warwick," when his sister played in high school and is eager to see a game at Rider someday. Rylee Diffenderfer said that hearing him cheer always pushes her on the field because she knows her brother will never play competitive sports as she does.

"Something everybody has to go through when they're playing sports is those mental blocks," Rylee Diffenderfer said. "Anytime I hear him cheering, it's not a question anymore, like, I'm going to give it my all. Hearing him cheer reminds me that I'm able to do things that he's never going to be able to do."

"It was hell"

Jackson was born 6 pounds, 11 ounces and a week premature. Doctors found one issue after another.

Jackson has hydrocephalus, which his mother said amounts to "fluid in the brain." He also has a Chari malformation, which is a result of his cerebellum — the part of the brain responsible for voluntary movements and motor skills — forming backward and doctors are not sure why.

The Diffenderfer's oldest son had horseshoe kidneys, a condition when the kidneys are turned together and form a U-shape. His heart was enlarged and had holes in it. His medical anomalies meant Jackson's prognosis looked bleak.

He has endured 20 surgeries in 15 years, some of which were invasive on the brain.

Josh Diffenderfer described his son's first year of life as a "hell at the time. It was a very chaotic time and traumatic ... it [was] hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Doctors gave mixed messages about their son's heart conditions called cardiomyopathy and atrial septal defect. Some said he would survive with his enlarged heart and others said he would not.

"When he was a baby, [doctors] would tell us all the things that were wrong," Christina Diffenderfer said emotionally. "But he was there. He made eye contact, he would smile. I think we all believed that there was more for him."

A sibling bond

Even though Jackson is differently-abled, Rylee Diffenderfer and her brother bond over many things. When she would drive him to Barnes & Noble so he could look at Scooby-Doo books, they would always listen to music.

"Happy" by Pharrell Williams is Jackson's favorite song and he loves to sing and dance. Rylee Diffenderfer made him a three-hour playlist on her iPhone.

"I'll just hit shuffle and he knows every word to every song," Rylee Diffenderfer said. "It's just another way for me to sort of show him what he is capable of doing."

Her brother's favorite song includes the lyrics "Can't nothing bring me down." However, in quiet moments, Rylee Diffenderfer worries about him.

"Probably every day, a 'what if' question crosses my mind," Rylee Diffenderfer said. "What if somebody picks on him? What if somebody misunderstands him?"

"Sometimes, it's the last thing I think about when my head hits the pillow at night," she admitted.

Her escape from those worries, in addition to field hockey, is writing.

She brings her thoughts from her head, down her left arm and through her hand, from the ink in the pen and onto her white notepad. Some of those stories made it onto her blog titled "Through Jackson's Eyes."

"I would try to depict how I consciously make an effort to see the world through his eyes as much as I can rather than my own," Rylee Diffenderfer explained. "I genuinely believe that seeing the world through his eyes is better than seeing the world through my own eyes and I hope that other people would feel the same way after reading the ways that he has inspired me to look at things differently."

Her eloquent posts touch on many topics throughout her brother's extraordinary life. She wrote about her brother's

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